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Mountain

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Thesis Report
for the
Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Fine and Applied Arts
Rochester Institute of Technology

Mountain

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Preface

Mountain is not a total culmination of my past experience, but a direction for the years that will follow. It is the beginning for the part of my life where I will truly be tested. Where I will succeed or fail.

A painter who addresses the public not in order to present his work but to reveal some of his ideas on the art of painting exposes himself to several dangers. In the first place, I know that some people like to think of painting as dependent upon literature and therefore like to see in it not general ideas suited to pictorial art, but rather specifically literary ideas. I fear, therefore, that the painter who risks himself in the field of the literary man may be regarded with disapproval; in any case, I myself am fully convinced that the best explanation an artist can give of his aims and ability is afforded by his work.

Henri Matisse
Notes of a Painter

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Individuals more accomplished than I have endeavored to find what truth is in regards to what painting is. They have not discovered any definite answer. Neither will I, and that is the truth.

To begin, I try to feature a person painting-- putting one mark next to another. It is amazing to me and I wonder what reasons people have for doing such a thing for so long. In art history we learn that the cave paintings had for prehistoric man magical powers over the animals he hunted. But all of us who are married know that a prehistoric wife probably nagged her husband into finally doing something with that wall. We will never know. The cave paintings for me have another meaning. They have connected us in the present with our prehistoric parents. Though they are no longer physically present, what they created has made them immortal. Immortality is probably the reason why I paint. To extend my physical present into the future while at the same time remaining connected to the past and realizing my integration in nature.

Nature, for me, is an uncontrollable system subject to its laws only--continuous yet changing while remaining the same. For the short time each man is on this earth, the mountain he saw as a young boy was probably the same when he died. Why is the man what he is and the mountain what it is? Somewhere in the beginning of time it and the man were part of the same star and someday will be united in yet another star.

No art can escape from nature for all art or any creative endeavor is an extension of nature. Each process depends on the previous process until finally at the beginning is nature. The extent to which nature is revealed by the artist depends on his philosophy or interpretation. It can be simple or complex or both; of course, it is both.

This system in nature is diagrammed by me when I begin a work. The painting, for me, begins long before the marks are placed on the canvas. The wood for the stretcher I know will be subject to changes in the environment. The canvas' tension will fluctuate. Then the paint itself will slowly begin its migration back to the natural form it once was. Such is the life

of a painting, and a man. Life. We are born and begin development, taking in knowledge, learning skills and growing. At the same time we move toward death. My question is how natural is the creative art and how does it compare to life? Now I see the act coincides with life.

The question being answered by myself at first was that nothing created could symbolize life because the means I use to symbolize these things have been torn and twisted out of their natural forms into canvas and paint. My second answer is that paint is not truth, nor is canvas. So it is not my intention to paint truth but to symbolize non-truth, which is truth.

The Paintings

After I get my head out of the clouds thinking about the moving stretcher frame and the canvas and its fluctuating tension, I begin work. The first step is to modulate the surface with equal-sized squares or actually diamond shapes. Just as a horizontal line can create a calm mood, the diamond with its diagonal lines can create a feeling of movement and fragility. Establishment of a rhythm is next. To accomplish this the diamonds, besides being placed next to each other, are grouped into zig-zag shapes--three diamonds up; then down. Visual rondos are what I like to consider by paintings, the same rhythm repeated. This then is the basic unchanged diagram that I build on.

The use of the same size shapes throughout the canvas, in terms of design, void of any color or organic representation makes the picture plane totally flat. Combination of the design with objects is next. Curved lines representing organic forms are placed randomly throughout the diagram. Usually, they are plant shapes and a female figure. The utilization of

recognizable shapes help to humanize the unfeeling rigidity of the diagram. Since I feel that my diagram represents time moving rather than space, the illusion of space is created by the change in color intensity. Thus, I have space but more importantly, I have maintained the objects existing in the same time.

In each painting there are usually only three different colors plus black and white. A bright color, a dull color and something in-between are used, each representing one of the primaries. Limited palette helps establish more rhythmic relationships throughout the work. Intensity of the zig-zag rondos from bright to dull helps to destroy the flat surface and the diagram. After the first application of color, and sometimes before, I mix transparent glazes and begin to pour and splatter paint. This further destroys or hides the diagram. Also, it adds more organic shapes. Then areas that I judge to be more pleasing than others are saved and another application of opaque paint is applied. There are no rules to follow in this selection except for visceral ones. This combination of controlled diagram and random shapes enables me to satisfy both

my intellect and intuition. I continue with more pouring and splattering and re-application of opaque paint. Selection of some of the patterns and shapes the poured and splattered paint create to be filled in with opaque paint is the next tactic.

By now the zig-zag rhythms have been broken up into a variety of diamonds, chevrons as well as broad flat opaque areas accompanied by the selected drip and splatter ones. To further enhance the space, lines that separate areas of the same color but different intensities are extended into the flat areas and added to other parts of the work to re-establish the original diagram. In addition, the lines further the play in the pictorial space and become ambiguous, first beginning a dividing line then a shape floating in the created psychological space.

When the word painting is mentioned, most people tend to visualize either Michelangelo or Picasso. Some will choose the work of Michelangelo over Picasso because it looks "real". Then there are those who would like Picasso because his work is accepted as being "good". Very few, however, can really "read" modern painting for what it really is: a language not

unlike the written language I am using now to convey my idea. In writing, the story-telling part is easy enough, most of the time, to understand, but it is important to see abstract symbols, letters, form, together to create other abstract symbols: words. These words, in the mind, not on the page, produce a visual experience not unlike the experience one should feel from a painting. The painter in the same way uses abstract forms, brush strokes, color, lines, shape, to convey an idea. There is much more involved in painting than raw emotional rage, although it too is there: a great deal of thought and work are involved.

The painter can never really predict each brush stroke or mark. Much the same as "real" life circumstances and events cannot be predicted with accuracy. One of the important parts of painting is the coordination of each succeeding mark.

The goal of each artist, engineer, factory worker is, in essence, the same: to establish a sense of totality or unity of the world. Each one with a place in the whole.

The Symbol

When man first realized his existence he must have wondered what he looked like. Not physically perhaps, but spiritually. He tried to place himself in nature. This first man needed objects to gratify his emotional and physical needs. Because of this he created symbols. Such symbols represented the sun, moon and stars, food and fertility. These symbols were used by early man and primitive cultures today because of the belief that they possess magical powers.

I am going to attempt to consider the symbol in painting as a societal or cultural "happening" and as an attempt for the artist to find his inner identity. All things that man makes, whether it be painting, sculpture or automobiles, are symbols of the society that he is a part of.

What are symbols? I believe that there are only two types. There is the extrinsic symbol and the intrinsic symbol. The extrinsic symbol is some recognizable object that would evoke emotion because of some definition a particular culture has placed on it. An example might be a dove meaning peace or the color violet

in Catholicism meaning penance. The intrinsic symbol is an emotional gesture or an actual and visual response by the artist to evoke a similar response by the viewer or to express his individuality.

Unlike the extrinsic symbols which have meaning to a particular culture, the intrinsic symbols, I feel, are universal in their meaning and are timeless. These idea symbols are the plastic elements of all art and that structure that mankind has hung its emotional responses on. If there is such a thing as psychological laws of vision, and by that I mean something similar to the laws of physics, then these conceptual symbols would be the elements which serve to form that law. They cannot be created, but they simply manifest themselves through the artist's reaction to his particular environment and place in time.

For myself, one of the symbols although less obvious, perhaps, than the dove or the color violet, is Brunellesco's discovery of mathematical perspective. If understood, perspective is one of the most communicative symbols as it can place the viewer in a particular position or point of view. These intrinsic symbols

take art beyond the magical and into the spiritual and at the same time become a universal language of mankind and not just of a particular culture.

Illusion is also symbolic. The painting of the Renaissance masters created the illusion of depth through the use of perspective to show man's place in the universe and to glorify God. Jackson Pollock, in modern times, achieves the same visual effect of spacial illusion, but in quite a different manner. Pollock does not use perspective or sculptural illusion but an optical one. He creates this illusion not by dissolving the flatness of the picture surface but upon the surface itself. The illusion is there, but at the same time the surface integrity is kept. This illusion may be symbolic of nature or it can create a world of form and color that functions as a man-made environment that offers the viewer a world set apart from nature.

Pigment is a symbol. It may not actually symbolize any emotion, but it does show the technical advances from egg and tempera to oil, to acrylic and so on. Yet the paint itself, used as a symbol, is

unnatural. The pigments, the oil, the plastic resin, etc. have been taken and dissociated from nature. Once placed on a surface, they begin to disintegrate, trying to return to the natural state they once had. So like the "surface", the "paint" should be a tool that the artist uses to visualize his ideas, because the paint has no life of its own as the act of painting does. Dripping or pouring paint symbolizes for me only an illustration of gravity, which is symbolic of natural forces apart from the artistic.

Line could be a symbol with no specific meaning, but it is possible to suggest certain general, and perhaps obvious, meanings by a selective use of line. For example, short staccato lines will suggest more aggression than lines having a smooth flowing quality. The thickness of a varied line can create the illusion of depth or movement. The line probably is the most direct way to symbolize and communicate ones emotions.

Another symbol that is so common in modernist painting is flatness. Essentially, I feel that in painting the ideal symbol would perhaps be that of the two

dimensional surface as being symbolic truth. Yet how can any dimensions be placed on thought? The surface is where the artist visualizes these ideas.

Support for the idea that flatness is also an illusion comes to me from the popularity of the "vast wasteland" of television. What a symbol the TV has become! Here we have the flat screen with a scanner shooting light and creating recognizable images on this screen. Nothing more than light. But what emotions can be evoked by that light. If you have ever viewed people watching a football game, you would know what I mean. My question is, where is the image? Is it on the screen or in the viewer's mind?

Those questions bring me back to painting. Are the images real on the surface or real in the viewer's mind? The images in the viewer's mind are symbolic of reality, and therefore, are real. What I said about television and painting and the image being in the mind and not on any surface could be a good argument for not painting. However, I feel that we have our senses to consider and not just our intellect.

I find it difficult to accept the idea or the image that is in the mind as the purest and ultimate form of expression. The question is whether ones approach, be it illusion, flatness, etc., should portray nature, be an abstract experience, or be purely conceptual. Of course, there is no right or wrong answer for that question. Each viewer must find that which he can relate to best. No single painting could satisfy every individual's needs.

I have decided color is a symbol, although I realize that it does not have specific psychological properties. Color symbols are too ambiguous and uncontrollable as compared to line. For example, a horizontal line will evoke an emotional response of calmness in the majority of people. The color red is supposed to make one feel aggressive. I do not argue with these psychological theories to color, but believe that one color can evoke a number of responses. For example, ones response to a shining blue automobile would be quite different probably to the ones reaction to a steaming bowl of blue soup. Yet color is the most important intrinsic symbol in the modern painter's possession because it is the means for the development of all the other elements in painting.

Mondrian used the primary colors to symbolize what was basic and essential to him in nature. Kandinsky also used color in a symbolic way, although much differently than did Mondrian. Using color, along with line, both concerned themselves with those inward and spiritual elements, and not with an attempt to represent pictorially the appearance of the outer world.

I mentioned the "object" as an intrinsic symbol having definitions placed upon it by society. The representational object can be an intrinsic symbol if it does not have definitions attached to it and keeps its own relationship in nature or society. Therefore, the dove that symbolized extrinsically "peace" or the "Holy Ghost" intrinsically would mean "bird" or perhaps "flight".

Paul Klee used figurative symbols in his work which are childlike and very personal to show more than the real world. At the same time, the non-representational aspects of his work are also important. Those elements of line, form and color are in their purest visual state.

Not only is the paint, surface and subject matter symbolic, but also the viewer. Painting is a symbolic language. Being a language it should communicate-- but with whom? Other artists, scientists, the intellectual

elite, or with the masses? The responsibility for understanding this relatively new language, "modern painting", rests entirely with the viewer. I find the fact strange that some will like a musical piece because of the rhythm or movement but not like modern painting, which often emphasizes the same things. However, given as much time to develop as music, visual rhythms too will be understood, provided the viewer will put forth a bit of effort.

Never before in history has the artist had ^{so} much freedom, so many techniques to choose from, and such awareness of other art and artists. There is no set tradition he must follow, as artists have in the past. The artist is free to choose his means of expression and what he wishes to express. In a time of political, economical and social unrest, this new freedom the artist has is a most promising hope of the future.

List of Paintings

1. Hard Luck Story, oil, 43" x 57"
2. The Quadroon Girl, oil, 38" x 57"
3. Choric Song, oil, 36" x 36"
4. Woman in a Violet Room, oil, 38" x 57"
5. Refugee, oil, 37" x 52"
6. Woman With Green, oil, 40" x 57"
7. Woman With Red, oil, 40" x 57"
8. The Celestial Pilot, oil, 38" x 54"
9. Woman at Dawn IV, oil, 40" x 57"
10. Swimmer, oil, 40" x 57"
11. Woman in a Red Room, oil, 48" x 86"



1



2



3



4





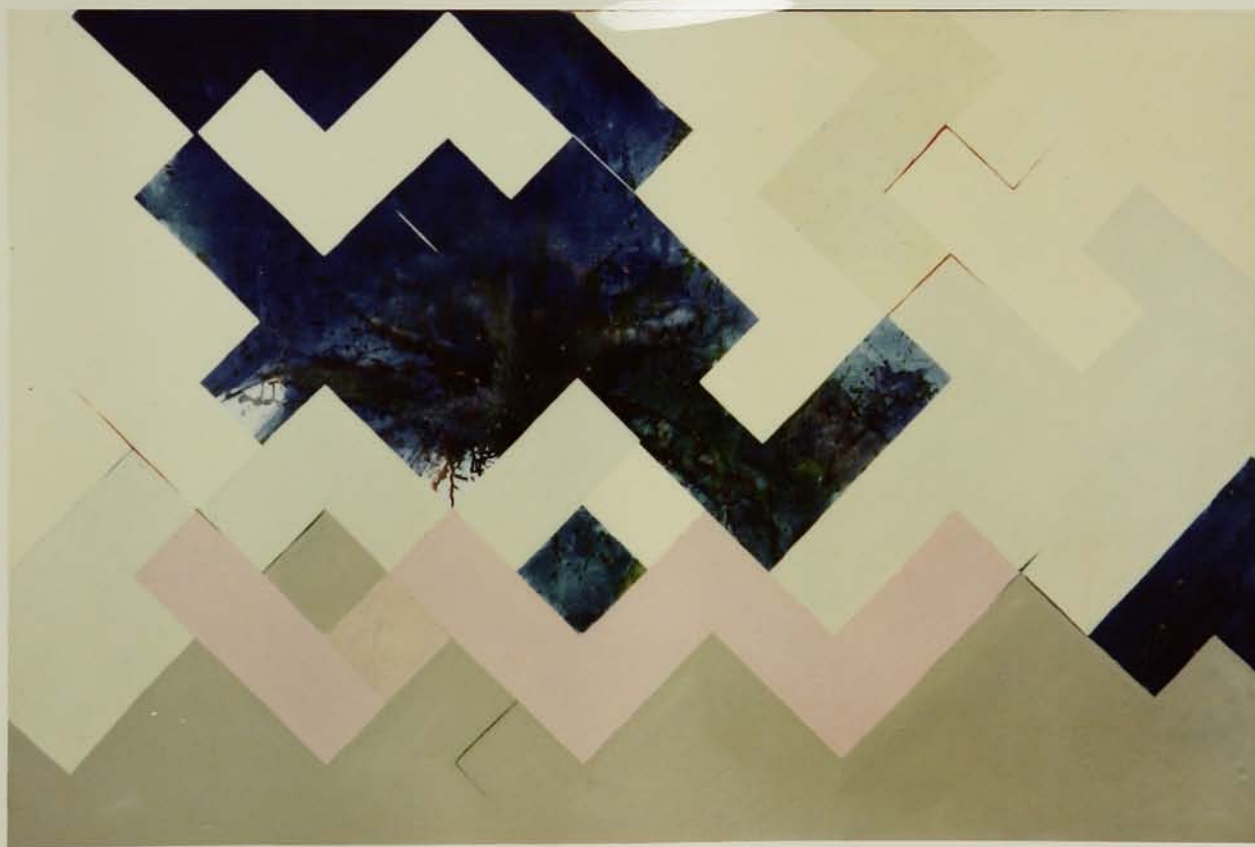
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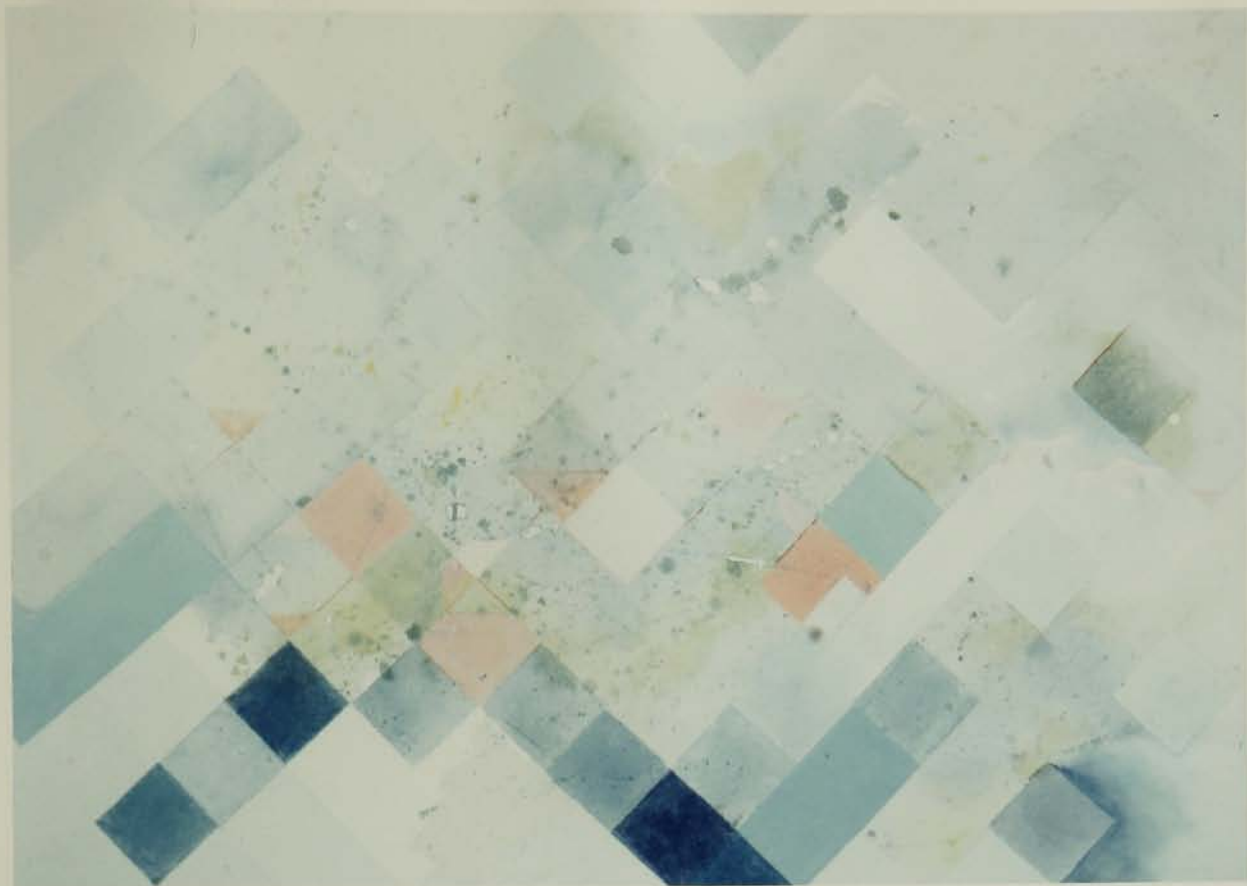
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